

# The St Johns River Ferry – a crucial crossing for cyclists

by Herb Hiller



*Keep the St. Johns River Ferry in service and northeast Florida's network of coastal trails will become the pride of the South.*

That's the conviction of a regional task force to save the ferry that in January began forming a supportive Highway A1A business association to lobby for full funding of the ferry's required capital needs.

So far, only two-thirds of capital funding is in place. Ridership fares generate no more than 60 percent the cost of ferry operations.

The ferry runs a mere nine-tenths of a mile between Mayport Village on the South shore near the river's mouth, and Fort George Island on the North shore.

But remove the ferry from service, and the safe, short scenic run that is only \$1.00 for cyclists turns into a dangerous and harrowing 35-mile ride along Jacksonville arterial roads, many without designated bike lanes.

Photo: Val Bostwick

The ride would swing west from the coast beyond the Dames Point Bridge (that doesn't allow bicycles) to Jacksonville's Main Street Bridge.

From there, riders would continue north through downtown before returning to the coast alongside Heckscher Drive cargo haulers that serve JAXPORT.

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The ferry is an official part of Florida Highway A1A and is widely relied on by cyclists, motoring residents and tourists, although it receives no funding from the state.

Last October, when JAXPORT rid itself of the ferry with a payout of \$200,000 matched by the City of Jacksonville, that still left new ferry owners, the City of Jacksonville's St.

Johns River Ferry Commission, without a hoped for \$200,000 that FDOT failed to provide.

HMS Ferries (a division of HMS Global Maritime) operates the crossing.

Presently an all-volunteer "Keep the Ferry" Task Force drives fundraising and marketing to increase ridership.

The new business association would

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demonstrate how many companies and jobs the ferry safeguards and the fouling of city streets that would result from the displacement of motor vehicles that rely on the ferry — 254,245 during the 12 months beginning October 1, 2011.

During that time, almost 10,000 bicyclists and pedestrians also used the ferry. [Figures from HMS Ferries.]



Loss of the ferry would sever the link between north and south sections of the National Park Service Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, the Ft. George and Talbot Islands State Parks, and the East Coast Greenway, including the new six-mile showcase Amelia Island Trail scheduled for April completion.

While backers work political channels to secure additional funding for the ferry, a new element in interest might also help make a difference.

This is the congressionally designated Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor that extends between Wilmington, North Carolina, and St. Augustine, Florida.

The corridor overlaps the route of the East Coast Greenway through four states.

Next year, the National Park Service will mark the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act that will draw further attention to the coastal trail and the St. Johns River Ferry.

Bike Florida is also exploring the possibility of operating its 2014 Spring Tour from St. Augustine to Fernandina Beach that would return to St. Augustine by way of a broad loop westward.

More to come as details are available.